

# **Possible and Personal**

## **Current Trends in Western Doctrines of God**

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### **1. A multitude of God-concepts**

The theme is 'salvation - or *'Heil'* in German - on a continent of diversity'. Before we even start to reconsider the meaning of salvation in our time, we need to ask whether it has not lost its meaning all in all after the so-called 'death of God'. Is it possible to conceive of salvation without God? Or would the term become redundant or unintelligible? In this article, I will consider some of the problems that theologians are confronted with in contemporary Western culture. If indeed God is absent or at least to many seems silent or silenced, then how will theologians be able to communicate the idea of salvation to others? God-talk in Europe however, is obviously not only a matter for theologians and religious people. Writers and scientists are also highly involved in the current conversation on God. In the past few decades, they especially have confronted Western culture with sophisticated systems of ideas that not only enrich, but also compete with prevailing religious doctrines.

In Nobel Laureate J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, the author's alter ego Elizabeth Costello dreams about a situation in which she has to express her beliefs before she can enter a portal to the other side.<sup>1</sup> In this

<sup>1</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, New York 2003.

satirical rewriting of a Kafkaesque short story, the female writer does not express a belief in God, nor in some idea of salvation. A group of judges adamantly persists in asking her about her beliefs, but she ends up feeling ashamed and inadequate for not knowing whether to believe in facts, although as a writer she considers this not an option, or in fiction. The idea of fiction however, might well prove to be closely related to that which is behind the portal that she wants to go through to feed her groundless curiosity of what is behind it. For Coetzee's prudent and cautious character, salvation is a term with a question mark behind it: it signifies something behind a portal only to go through with care and conviction without even knowing why or knowing what to find there. In this story, a decline of belief in God seems to have made it nearly impossible to believe in some idea of salvation, for the very reason that it became unintelligible.

The French writer Michel Houellebecq presents a much darker vision of a world with a decline of beliefs. Yet, contrary to Coetzee, Houellebecq is not worried about that decline as he offers a view of a human, all too human world, in which 'salvation' will occur in the factual realm of what is there to be perceived:

*Materialism has lost its historical importance. A first barrier needed to be breached and that was God. A number of people succeeded in doing so, to discover that they found themselves distressed and desperate. But, this second barrier also collapsed. They did not need a God anymore, or the idea of an underlying reality. There are human perceptions, human testimonies, human experiments. There is the intellect that connects these perceptions, and the feeling that brings them to life. These develop themselves without any metaphysics or ontology. We do not need the ideas of God, nature or reality anymore. Based on experimental results, through a rational intersubjectivity, the community of perceivers comes to an agreement. Experiments are connected by*

*theories, which are falsifiable and formulated as economically as possible. There is a perceived world, a sensed world, a human world.*<sup>2</sup>

This quote from the last chapter of Houellebecq's *Les Particules Élémentaires*, offers a futuristic vision of the development of ideas, from the decline of materialism and Christianity to the triumph of evolutionary biology ceding to the strange benignity of genetic perfection. However, this is the vision of just one of the two brothers that figure in the book. In *Les Particules Élémentaires*, science or intellectualism, and religion cannot co-exist. The consequence is moral decay, represented through the life of the other brother. He is driven by feelings of nostalgia and anger, and by his sexual desires. The author seems to imply that for a humane person, one needs to fuse the two brothers together. According to the novel, perhaps this is what a new religion needs to be, a humanistic combination of both that would prevent us from the horrors of both religious fundamentalism and scientific materialism.

God-talk in the European context of pluralism and diversity is continually faced with yet another problem that is much older than the challenges of cultural developments, scientific achievements and moral issues of our present-day context: How can we talk about a divine reality that is in some essential sense transcendent and thus not completely locatable in human experience? Although this question may underlie all inter-religious dialogues, be they theologically or politically instigated, a pluralist conception or rather a plurality of concepts of God and gods, with all its richness, challenges and contradictions, is a given fact that does not have to be our main concern. Because, if it is true that we are living through a clash of cultures, then we are more likely to be directly confronted with practical, political and ethical issues than with the varieties of religious experience or multitude of doctrines of God.<sup>3</sup> In that context, a multi-voiced conversation on God and gods should be seen as an advantage,

<sup>2</sup> M. Houellebecq, *Les particules élémentaires*, Paris 1998. (Transl. by SvE)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ch. Taylor, *Varieties of religion today. William James revisited*, Cambridge 2002.

rather than as a problem. Instead, the ultimate impossibility to talk about God will continue to be the main problem.

## 2. A silenced God

Theologians have been quite aware of this problem in the last few decades. As an unfortunate consequence, most of them have been concentrating on anything but God. Theological speaking of God fell silent after Paul Ricoeur's conclusion that language about God is a particularly effective way of expressing aspects of human life and experiences of the world. David Tracy's assessments pushed God even further into the background, arguing that whatever transcendent intentionality the term God has, it eventually expresses a disposition of the human subject rather than of an active, let alone omnipotent divine agent.<sup>4</sup> From then on, a specific brand of liberal Catholic theology focused on the use of theological hermeneutics in contexts of human suffering and political liberation. This made for a God whose power consists of solidarity with humanity, a God becoming the most eminent and most immanent sufferer of all. Although these theologies give meaning to theistic language within the context of the human sphere without having to claim that such language is fully literal or constitutive or even realistic, they do not leave room for a critical discourse about such language; let alone for a divine voice that as Opposite is part of that discourse. God threatened to disappear from theology as the true victim of the linguistic turn and only seemed to survive as the Empty Space in a quasi-postmodern yet deeply modern theology, or in a misunderstood negative theology as the Eternal Silence.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ph. Clayton, *The problem of God in modern thought*, Grand Rapids 2000, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. C. Cunningham, *Genealogy of nihilism. Philosophies of nothing and the difference of theology*, London 2002. For the opposite position, see O. Davies, D. Turner [eds], *Silence and the Word. Negative theology and incarnation*, Cambridge 2002.

This might well be the case within a certain type of philosophical and liberal theology, but the advocates of post-liberal or increasingly dominant neo-orthodox theologies are not troubled by these hermeneutical considerations. Yet, both the establishment of a Christian humanism and the eschatology of divine participation motivate, for example, John Milbank's philosophical Christology. According to Milbank, we correspond to other human beings only in as far as our expressions approximate, in a participatory sense, to the entire expression of the person by the mind of God. That kind of participation is the person's actual existence standing against nothing.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically enough, it seems that Milbank's radical-dialectic, esoteric and elitist style gives voice to the simple faith of Europe's lost believers and non-believers alike. For them, the presumed god, albeit a personal being or the force or energy that is being itself or brought being into existence, must still be a god that is either an emanated Good, or the One in which we naturally participate, in other words: a relational One.

Another option, mainly presented by Derridean philosophers, is a contemporary rereading of Exodus and Pseudo-Dionysus' Divine Names, currently leading to an anti-Aristotelic-Thomistic, Augustinian revival in postmodern thought. John Caputo and Richard Kearney lead this movement, partly motivated by a criticism of Milbank's fideism and partly by a criticism of Jean Luc Marion's God without Being.<sup>7</sup> Kearney criticises Marion for developing a theology that excludes non-communicant non-Catholics from participating in the conversation about God. Apart from this exclusion, the danger of a God without being is that of an alterity so "other" that it becomes impossible to distinguish it from monstrosity, albeit mystical or sublime. Kearney's alternative is a new interpretation of the Exodic Name "I-am-Who-is", choosing the mystic philosopher Meister Eckhart as a first guide. Kearney calls for an onto-eschatological hermeneutics, or a 'poetics of the possible'. God here, becomes the One Who

<sup>6</sup> J. Milbank, *Theology and social theory. Beyond secular reason*, Oxford 1990, 1-9.

<sup>7</sup> J. Caputo, M. Dooley, M. Scanlon (eds), *Questioning God*, Bloomington 2001.

may be.<sup>8</sup> So, charting a course between the Scylla of a Cartesian metaphysics of divine substance and the Charybdis of Marion's negative theology of pure gift, Kearney offers the idea of a divine being both there and not yet there, in the wake of Derrida's philosophy of a messianic 'perhaps'.

### 3. A godless culture?

All these theological considerations and debates might form the background of our theological discussions on salvation in a European context, but I would like to put them even more to the background to focus on the cultural context in which these debates take place. One cannot emphasise enough the fact that Europe is a secular, *and* a post-traditional, *and* a Christian, *and* an Orthodox, *and* a Muslim *and* an agnostic culture. Frustrating as it may be for some, European culture can no longer be clearly identified as a secularised or even post-traditional culture.

Apart from the secular atheistic denomination, all the aforementioned cultural communities have at least one thing in common: viewing the unknowability, and therefore the unnameability of God as the essential nature of the divine. Why is this fact so often unmentioned or forgotten? Perhaps because for many people it is quite impossible to admit that they are agnostic, which seems so difficult to combine with their faith and beliefs. It threatens all the certainties built on that ungraspable moment of faith, an experience or conviction that we cannot and do not want to rationalise fully, let alone make available to others as the source of our beliefs.

Apart from having at least one of the divine characteristics in common, there is also a cultural trend that is described by the Dutch theologian

<sup>8</sup> R. Kearney, *The God who may be. A hermeneutics of religion*, Bloomington 2001.

Anton Houtepen with a neologism: a culture of agnosm.<sup>9</sup> It describes the fact that God seems to have disappeared from people's consciousness. Houtepen distinguishes three forms of agnosm. 1. Trivial agnosm: "we can do without God"; 2. Resentful agnosm: "faith in God has proven to be bad for humanity", and 3. Epistemological agnosm: "God is a projection or an unnecessary duplication that we could easily do without".<sup>10</sup> In the quote from Michel Houellebecq in the beginning of this article, a variant of trivial agnosm is combined with the idea of scientific progress.

The sciences, and especially theoretical physics, are also challenging the theological and biblical concept of God. In this scientific age, it is widely thought that the literal, the countable and measurable real is the true reality that provides the only form of truth. Therefore, God should be the sort of being the sciences could measure, a super-person, an empirically noticeable agent making differences to the world, which we can test and verify. God must at least be a cause whose effects we can discover by experiment and observation. This concept of truth pursued by scientists thinking about God, suggests new images of God, as the Designer of a self-organising process, or the Communicator of Information, or the Determiner of indeterminacies, all presenting a deity about which we may ask: can it and does it intervene in natural law.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. God as a Person revisited

Besides the secular culture of agnosm and the successful scientific developments, there is an obvious and undeniable third group of conversation partners in Europe that challenges or might change our

<sup>9</sup> A. Houtepen, *God, een open vraag. Theologische perspectieven in een cultuur van agnosme*, Zoetermeer 1997, 53-81. (In English: *God, an open question. Theological perspectives in an age of agnosticism*, London 2002.)

<sup>10</sup> Cf. G. Ward, *True religion*, [Blackwell Manifestos], Oxford 2003, 1-34.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. I. Barbour, *When science meets religion. Enemies, strangers or partners?*, London 2000.

conception of God, namely believers from other religions. In the current European context, it seems appropriate to mention at least one religious partner here, Islam, but there are others that could be mentioned, as could the different denominations within other religions. For now, I would like to concentrate on one aspect: the danger of idolatry. It seems that after the iconoclasm debate and the Reformation, the current Christian-Muslim-dialogue again poses questions about the use of images of God. However, Muslims too use images, but these are verbal and not visual. For example, they speak of God on the throne of glory, with all-seeing eyes and all-encompassing hands.<sup>12</sup>

It seems that, for the sake of devotees, infinity always appears in a multitude of names and forms, and that these are usually personal names and forms. However, there is one image that seems to be a *skandalon*, an insurmountable obstacle to continue the dialogue on God with Muslims, and that is the image of the Trinity. The Trinity might in some sense violate a monotheistic conception of God, but it also emphasises the personhood of God by means of a, perhaps unnecessary or even improper triplication of the divine person.

It is indeed quite unfortunate that the traditional phrase 'three persons in one substance' tends to evoke a picture, as Keith Ward has put it satirically, of three people sitting in a bowl of soup, discussing their separate interference with the world of humankind.<sup>13</sup> Of course, the Trinity does not offer a picture of three individuals, but an image of the divine characteristics being related in a personal way. A trinitarian idea of God however, means that, contrary to human individuals, God cannot be called a 'person' in any straightforward way. Therefore, the current and persistent debate on the personal image of God might not involve a return of 'the man with the beard', which is in some sense a loss since there seem to be no proper alternatives available.

<sup>12</sup> For example Surah 9 and 85.

<sup>13</sup> K. Ward, *God. A guide for the perplexed*, Oxford 2002, 234-235.



One suggestion to make it possible to continue the dialogue on this topic with Muslims, might be to keep an awareness of the function, of analogies and metaphors, sometimes helpful but on other occasions violent, firmly in mind and to accept that the full reality of God is far beyond anything we can think of as a person or anything else for that matter. However, during the Muslim-Christian dialogue on the concept of the Trinity, Christians for themselves might rediscover the challenges of a relation of an individual or a community of individuals with a divine Person. That Person may make it possible for individuals to experience the infinity of that Person in a fuller, eternal context of love and justice. But that is only possible if there is indeed a personal ground of being.

Even on the, what seems to be religiously lost continent of Europe, people who passionately believe in an ultimate goodness of being will at least hope or affirm, although increasingly in diverse ways, that there is such a ground. This affirmation may not convince Houellebecq and his godless humanism anymore, but it might just get Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello through the portal. Not because she started to believe in God, but because the visions evoked by her groundless curiosity motivating her authorship seemed reason enough to suggest that there is a person who is the origin of it all.